How Holocaust Denial Became Mainstream

"THE TEACHING AND COMMEMORATION OF THE HOLOCAUST NEEDS TO RETURN TO WHAT HAPPENED IN THE HOLOCAUST," WRITES SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE. (UNIVERSAL HISTORY ARCHIVE/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

As memory of the atrocity fades, the war over its meaning is more important than ever.

By Simon Sebag Montefiore

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This is adapted from a January 19 address to the Holocaust Education Trust in London.

Holocaust Memorial Day is a fitting moment to talk about the use and abuse of history, the distortion and inversion of the Holocaust, and the devaluing of the language we use to fight racism and antisemitism. That language has become formulaic and meaningless and it needs to be updated.

The Holocaust, the biggest industrialized slaughter in the history of the world, is and always will be a vital historical event to understand human life and fate, to teach lessons and herald warnings about past and future. The way we see it also reflects our present. The shock of the Shoah and World War II helped inspire the very definition of crimes against humanity, the taboo against antisemitism, and the structure of the West and its world order. Yet now all these achievements are in peril.

When I think about the distortion of history, I remember when I was updating my history of Jerusalem and a friend rang me and said she had an "indispensable history of the Jewish people that you have to read." She sent it over, all wrapped up. When I opened it, I was surprised to find it was *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the antisemitic forgery created by the czar's secret police. History matters, but more than ever, we need to assert that it be based on real events.

Keeping alive the awareness of the Holocaust is more vital than ever because the last witnesses are dying, and also because Holocaust denial, distortion, inversion, and perversion, combined with an eliminationist antisemitism, have made a spectacular comeback.

On a recent trip to my favorite restaurant in London I came upon a troubling scene: A mob of activists were screaming slogans of hate—anti-Israel, but also anti-Jewish slogans that abused the Holocaust and genocide to threaten a local restaurant, Miznon, that is British-owned but has Israeli connections. Hundreds of police were there to keep the mob at

a safe distance from the restaurant, but they were also protecting the bullies. If they had protested like this once or twice, that would have been a reasonable exercise of the right of protest and free speech. But this menacing boycott has gone on for months, and that is intimidation, harassment, and bullying by a gang of bigots, and this abuse of our freedoms cannot be allowed to stand. I admit that I did think this small event evoked a nightmare of Kristallnacht in Notting Hill Gate. The very phrase rebels against the British way of life and yet we have indulged this exploitation and abuse of the very freedoms we cherish in our democracies.

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The *Daily Mail* recently reported that the number of schools teaching Holocaust history in the UK has halved since October 7, 2023. That figure may be exaggerated, but it is obscenely ironic that the largest murder of Jewish civilians since 1945 has prompted teachers and unions to apply a dubious moral selectivity in favor of a bigoted, ahistorical ideology—because of events faraway in the Middle East.

Worrying as this is, it is also useful. It demonstrates how a relatively small movement of self-righteous ideologues has, without us noticing, captured some of the crowning heights and ivory towers of British society. Similar things are happening in the U.S. and France. And it has become normal and easy for activists in teachers unions, NGOs, and arts organizations to use boycotts and mass resignations to control debate and culture today, and impose an intolerant conformity instead of allowing an open discussion about antisemitism.

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The traditional denial of the Holocaust, by people who insist it didn't happen but rather wish it had, is no longer a strange monstrosity incubated in the dank laboratories of neo-Nazis and cranks. Instead, in traditional denial and ideological distortion, they have been joined by a new alliance that involves what used to be called "radical" or "progressive" and a conservative Islamism, along with Western "anticolonial" supporters of organizations like Hamas and states like the Iranian dictatorship. This is no longer about left or right, but while we all condemn it when it is coming from goose-stepping neo-Nazis, many too often indulge it when it comes from nearer home.

This tribal indulgence has made it easier for people with malign agendas to minimize or distort the Holocaust for their own ends. Even worse, many Western universities, media, nongovernmental organizations, and charities have abetted the distortion, erasure, or commandeering of the Holocaust.

Why and how has this happened?

The recognition and commemoration of the liquidation of an entire Jewish world in Europe became a universal measure of Western tolerance and democracy. The Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin coined the term *genocide* in 1944, and out of the shock of Hitler's crimes, the Allies created a system of international law and human rights to ensure peace under a new organization, the United Nations. The open societies of the West almost unanimously agreed to and enforced a taboo on

antisemitism and racism and the study and commemoration of the Holocaust in our calendars, our schools, expressed in new legal definitions and the language of antiracism. This was a moral triumph and coincided with a golden age for liberalism, humanitarianism, and tolerance in European societies and for Jewish life—for a while. It lasted 80 proud years, but it is now over.

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In some ways and with best intentions, the West has been hoisted by its own petard. The Holocaust was universalized and institutionalized. In a category mistake, Holocaust institutions deliberately played down the uniquely targeted scope, span, and effect of the "final solution" to appear more "inclusive." Jewish organizations played down the central Jewish role in the events in a nod to liberal universalism and out of guilt and gratitude for postwar tolerance and their success in America and Europe. As the morality of the Holocaust narrative was universalized, it was neutralized. Its teaching became procedural, its calendar ritualistic, its shock diffused, its language—of genocides and antiracism—became virtuous jargon, a universal formula that was an easy gateway for admission to civil society shorn of its deeper significance.

Over the past 80 years, as the West lost its paramountcy, the many former colonies that were now independent states in the UN came to regard this moral rule-based order with its legal definitions as evidence of Western colonial humbug in a Western-controlled order. Within Britain and America, the commemoration of the Holocaust, the avowal of antiracism, the taboo on antisemitism were the signs of a civilized country. Yet the

etiquette and pieties of antiracism and the reverence for Holocaust history became evidence to many of a neoliberal, neocolonialist, capitalistic system linked to American imperium—and Jewish power.

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Words are important here. As we learned last week, the people behind the banning of a Jewish member of Parliament from a Bristol school because of his Jewishness were a cabal of teachers unions and diversity, equity, and inclusion coordinators who constantly repeat the language of antiracism. We exist in a struggle where words often mean their opposite. *Diversity* can mean discrimination, *equity* becomes injustice, and *inclusion* is sometimes exclusion. And it turns out every bigot is a proud "antiracist" to his bones, every antisemite is against antisemitism; naturally, everyone is against the Holocaust and genocide.

In Britain, the prime minister and home secretary have attacked antisemitism, and the education secretary is investigating this antisemitism in education. But the language has become jargon, it has been devalued, and now is often meaningless and easily exploitable. Each case of anti-Jewish racism is treated as an astonishing surprise—until the killing of Jews on Yom Kippur, or a massacre in Pittsburgh or on Bondi Beach. Unless someone is murdered, the ideology and its Holocaust inversion is never fully rebutted. Our leaders declare that they are against "antisemitism" and "racism," but those are now universal slogans without content or depth.

We need leaders to say how they are against antisemitism and racism—and what they mean by it. Antisemitism is a shape-shifter and we need to shape-shift to keep up with it, to overtake it and defeat it. And to do so we need our leaders to be much more realistic and less naive in analyzing what the Jew haters are really doing and saying, and how we are responding.

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Why Antisemitism Is 'Moral Pornography'

How has this insidious jargon come not to stop racism but to protect it?

The degradation of the Holocaust is based on a neat but wicked inversion of Jewish history by which the tragedies of Jewish experience are used first against the Jews themselves and increasingly against our open societies.

After the 1967 Six-Day War, the Soviets created a new ideology of Holocaust inversion that has taken around 60 years to emerge into the light. In January 1969, at a conference in Cairo, Yevgeny Yevseyev, a well-connected Soviet diplomat, wrote an essay that denounced Zionism as a "modern form of fascism." After publishing it as a book titled *Fascism Under the Blue Star*, Yevseyev became the doyen of Soviet "Zionologists" who translated czarist antisemitic forgeries such as the *Elders of Zion*, replacing the word *Jew* with *Zionist*, and disinterred the medieval "blood libel" to direct it against Israel. "The practical application of the Zionist doctrine in the Middle East," wrote Yevseyev, was "genocide, racism, perfidy, duplicity, aggression, annexation. . . all the attributes of fascism that go back to Hitler." It was the first such use of *genocide*—the start of a weird, dark symmetry implying that the guilt institutionally imposed on

the West by Holocaust commemoration was no longer necessary—in fact, it was a travesty because the Holocaust was exaggerated. Furthermore, the Jews deserved what happened in World War II because of what they were doing in Palestine now—thus providing a sort of pre-absolution for Europe's Nazi past.

NEW YORK CITY PROTESTERS CARRYING PLACARDS THE DAY AFTER THE UNITED NATIONS PASSED A RESOLUTION DETERMINING THAT ZIONISM IS A FORM OF RACISM AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION, NOVEMBER 11, 1975. (PETER

KEEGAN/KEYSTONE/HULTON ARCHIVE VIA GETTY IMAGES)

The “Zionism as Nazism” trope for 60 years remained the preserve of extremists like the Popular Front for Liberation of Palestine, Baader-Meinhof and the Red Brigade, as well as the Communist bloc. In 1975, the UN passed a “Zionism is racism” resolution. In May 1976, the Soviet delegate to the UN denounced Israel for “racial genocide” in the West Bank, the first time that had been used in this way in the General Assembly. At the end of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon after the Palestine Liberation Organization were forced to evacuate Beirut in 1982, Arafat accused Israel of “genocide” of Palestinians and Lebanese.

A rising wave of Islamists quickly co-opted that narrative and merged it with medieval anti-Judaism and 19th-century antisemitism. Hamas’s charter combines all of these, openly citing the *Elders of Zion*.

The fall of the USSR removed the boundaries of ideological schism and allowed their fusion. In 1999, an Australian academic, Patrick Wolfe, cited Australia to coin the ideological framework of settler colonialism, in which settlers eliminated indigenous peoples in a genocide. A theoretical framework was harnessed immediately to accuse Israel of that ultimate sin, neatly dovetailing with the Soviet inversion of the Holocaust and the increasingly fashionable ideology of decolonization, promoted from the 1960s by Frantz Fanon and others, by which any oppressive colonialists could be violently driven out or liquidated, in the model of the Algerian War. After Hamas took power in Gaza in 2006, stories started to appear that the strip was a “new Warsaw Ghetto”—with the Israelis as Nazis.

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Sixty years after Yevseyev's article, the kinetic drama and brazen killing and rape of Hamas's invasion of Israel on October 7—itself an event of genocidal intent—unleashed this latent Holocaust inversion trope, combined with decolonization, against Israel. The dark mirroring of the Holocaust was laced with much older bigotry, particularly the medieval blood libel, invented in Norwich, England, in 1144, in which Jews deliberately killed children, and the 19th-century calumnies, featured in *Elders of Zion* and other materials, that Jews controlled the world and encouraged war.

Yet this story is about more than the wars in the Middle East. The significance for Holocaust Memorial Day lies in the fact that—just as much as slogans like "globalize the intifada"—Holocaust inversion justifies and encourages murder in the West.

It is the moral power of the Holocaust—a sacred pillar of the West's rule-based order—that makes the accusation of an Israeli Holocaust against the Palestinians—a genocide—so poisonous and diabolical, for it commandeers the six million and cites the Holocaust as a moral trick, a legerdemain, to enforce a Western moral order that includes the existence of a Jewish state. And its diabolical nature is used to justify boycotts, attacks, virtue tests, and ultimately murder of Israelis and Jews. In the world of intellect and ideas, the deployment of the Holocaust against the Jews, and worse, against the Western order itself, is wickedness personified.

Given that the Holocaust itself and the jargon of antiracism have been so artfully commandeered, how can we teach the Holocaust, and how can

we take back the language?

The teaching and commemoration of the Holocaust needs to return to what happened in the Holocaust. Not a commemoration of what happened in other times and places to other peoples everywhere.

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Everyone has the right to criticize Israel and to support Palestinian rights—I cherish the hope of a Palestinian republic, safe and thriving next to a Jewish republic. But the minimalization, distortion, and degradation of the Holocaust and its history is as unnecessary to that campaign as are eliminationist and hateful language, the use of antisemitic blood libels, the deployment of calumnies about Jewish power and white supremacy and all the other ideological gibberish that reveals the real attitude of this activism and its Islamist wing toward Jews, and toward the West.

The Holocaust is unique but sadly, genocides are common. Yet we—our media, our academy, our politicians, our culture—pay little attention to genocides and democides across the world, if those crimes do not involve the West or people regarded (often wrongly) as Western. This shows the fundamental fraud of the "Zionism is Nazism" ideology.

The example of Sudan is stark. In 2009, its dictator was indicted for genocide. He was protected by South Africa and other countries and his indictment was attacked by decolonization professors as itself an example of Western colonialist imperialism. Now in the present civil war, 200,000 Sudanese have been murdered, including 40,000 in one period of a few days. Yet the "humanitarian" NGOs, international law activists,

and the UN do and say little. To give deeper meaning to the jargon of antiwar, antiracism, and the formulaic rituals of Holocaust commemoration, less cynicism and more bravery and honesty are required.

PROTESTERS ENTERED MIZNON HARDWARE LANE, AN ISRAELI RESTAURANT IN MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA, FOLLOWING NEWS THAT THE CO-OWNER JOINED THE GAZA HUMANITARIAN FOUNDATION AS A SPOKESPERSON. (ALEX ZUCCO/SOPA IMAGES/LIGHTROCKET VIA GETTY IMAGES)

Much of the damage has already been done by Holocaust inversion to the vocabulary and architecture of international human rights and law, often by the very supranational organizations and "humanitarian" NGOs themselves. How now will we describe the murder of Herero people, the Armenians in World War I, the Holocaust itself, the Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur genocides? But of course this is not truly about them; it is about

the supposed sins of the West, and damage to the West is part of the aim of this ideology.

The recent events in Iran reveal that damage so clearly. It is now possible that—according to sources within the Iranian dictatorship—30,000 or even 36,000 innocent protesters have been killed. It is plausible that the numbers are even higher. Indeed, those sources, cited this week in *Time* magazine, say that 30,000 were killed in two days, January 8 and 9. This is not in a war but in cold blood, and as such, it ranks with the deeds of a Hitler or a Stalin or a Mao or a Pol Pot. The murder of 30,000 in two days resembles a real event in the Holocaust: the killing at Babi Yar in Ukraine on September 29 and 30 in 1941, when 33,0000 Jews were killed by the Nazis.

The UN, many humanitarian NGOs, and the great majority of the celebrities who have for two years protested against Israel for the Gaza war were all silent—because Iran is seen as an enemy of the U.S. and Israel, and because Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's downfall might be to their benefit. Most of them are still shamefully and revealingly silent, or have deliberately soft-pedaled their criticism.

Last week the dissident Masih Alinejad—whom the Iranian dictator thrice tried to assassinate—reprimanded the disgraceful United Nations Secretary-General António Guteres. "The United Nations has failed to respond. . . . The Secretary-General himself has not spoken publicly against the massacre unfolding in Iran. Silence at this moment sends a signal, sends a message to the killers of young protesters. I strongly believe that the regime in Iran heard the clear message from the Secretary-General. I think the members of this body have forgotten the privilege and responsibility of sitting in this room. Secretary-General. . . why are you afraid of the Islamic Republic? Millions of innocent and

unarmed protesters have been silenced with bullets, mass arrest, prison, and a total communications blackout!"

Later Alinejad demanded to know: "Where is the left now? Where are the 'pro-Palestinian' and 'anti-war' activists when the Islamic Republic is killing innocent Iranians?" The respected Iranian Yale lecturer Arash Azizi—a proud Marxist—reflects "You would have thought leftists would understand the killing of Iranians on the streets fighting against a brutal capitalist regime. But unfortunately, they don't. The Western leftist movements hate the West. They hate their own societies."

The tragic slaughter of those brave young Iranians and the reaction to it have exposed the real nature of this movement and its real cynicism and wicked humbug in the use of the Holocaust inversion.

Eighty years after the Holocaust, all of this makes the mission of Holocaust education essential. As our trajectory since 1945 lengthens to today, it is clear now that the Holocaust was not the apocalyptic end of anti-Jewishness that we thought, but just a colossal spasm in the middle of a continuum which spans the Crusades, the blood libels, Khmelnytsky massacre, the pogroms, the Russian Civil War (we often forget 200,000 Jews were murdered during these two years), the Shoah itself, and then recently October 7, the Yom Kippur murders in Manchester, the Bondi Beach massacre in Australia, and whatever horrors come next.

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The necessity for politicians to speak more clearly is especially important. The use of antiracist jargon is obligatory and it remains essential, but instead of becoming a shield against anti-Jewish racism and hate, it has become a protection, a Get Out of Jail Free card for racists and ideologues themselves. It is admirable that our leaders here in Britain stand against antisemitism and racism and seek to protect Jewish community life, which is already overshadowed by threats and security measures. It is admirable that our security services daily defeat diabolic murderous plots. But the key is not to allow the adoption of this jargon by malignant actors to mask poisonous ideology and excuse intolerant bullying and dangerous hate, and not to allow it to work against its own underlying values and intentions.

Since the words have become devalued, leaders need to say what antisemitism and what racism they are standing against, and part of that is the rejection of egregious and harmful Holocaust inversion. We need to develop new words and restore the existing ones. Be braver in promoting what the words really mean and what their spirit is against. Be braver in retaking the institutions that have been captured by ideologues who are enforcing malign ideas and intolerant conformity. Get back to teaching what the Holocaust was—and what it wasn't. As the hatred shape-shifts our leaders must shape-shift with it.

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Lastly, one vital thing: An important part of education is to celebrate Judaism. Jewish history must not only be a chronicle of massacres and struggles. Jewish history is also joyful and remarkable and fascinating in

all its richness that embraces Judea, Babylon, and Egypt in ancient times, along with the vibrant communities of Andalusia, Constantinople, Morocco, Baghdad, Jerusalem, and Alexandria, and the amazing world of European Jewishness, the worlds of Ladino and Yiddish and now those of America and Israel. There is much to celebrate: Jewish art, culture, humor, films, poetry.

The Holocaust started with words that made it possible to dehumanize people thanks to their religion, race, or identity, then it moved to witch hunts, laws, boycotts, deportations, and finally killing.

The words, the history, the education of the Holocaust are more than ever the mark of a civilized society.

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Simon Sebag Montefiore is the author of *Jerusalem: A History of the Holy Land*. His next book, *The Cauldron: The Making of the Modern Middle East,* will be published in August.

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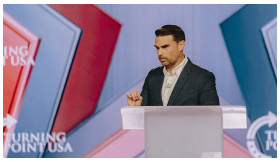

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